Secrets of Successful Government Websites

How to Create a Government Website That Returns Long-Term Value to Your Organization and the People It Serves

an adaptation of the publication by Vision Internet

www.visioninternet.com

Mark Deshon
Assistant Policy Scientist

institute *for* Public Administration

What Makes an Effective Website?

Most people know one when they use one yet have trouble articulating what makes it so.

Basic principles:

- Develop a strategy.
- Focus on your audiences' needs.
- Organize information logically.
- Provide interactive tools.
- Make the design unique.
- Follow the web paradigm.
- Optimize for speed.
- Maximize accessibility.
- Keep it fresh.
- Provide accurate information.

institute *for* Public Administration

1. Develop a Strategy

"Strategy is about stretching limited resources to fit ambitious aspirations."

—C.K. Prahalad, Professor
University of Michigan Business School

institute *for* Public Administration

Gov't Website Strategy

Websites may have multiple purposes, so…

- **Define what would be considered a success, with regard to website creation/redeployment.**

- **Answer fundamental questions.**

    For example: "What is the purpose of the website?"

- **Write everything down. Post it and let your team analyze it (goals and objectives).**

- **Refine the goals and objectives.**

- **Gain agreement or at least consensus.**

institute *for* Public Administration

2. Focus on Your Audiences' Needs

"Your audience gives you everything you need. They tell you. There is no director who can direct you like an audience."

—Fanny Brice

institute *for* Public Administration

Do What Your Audiences Want

- **Think of your audiences as customers.**

- **Determine what they need in terms of content and functionality. How? Ask them! Surveys and focus groups work well.**

- **Understanding you probably won't have the means or the budget to fulfill all needs/wants, prioritize.**

  - **Rank according to which provide the greatest benefit.**

  - **Rank according to which require greatest resources.**

- **Focus on those giving the most benefit for the least resources (i.e., the best value).**

institute *for* Public Administration

3. Organize Information Logically

"Out of clutter, find simplicity."

—Albert Einstein

Organize Logically for Customers

- Don't set up navigation that mirrors your organizational structure.

- Ensure maximum usability by offering info by subject or topic as well as by department or structure.

- Create web-like navigation by providing multiple paths to the same content. This will help ensure visitors find info in the way that is most intuitive to them.

- If you have a large site, consider content management tools.

4. Provide Interactive Tools

"[Website visitors] need features—the right ones, and not too many—presented in ways that empower users."

—Jakob Nielsen
Usability Expert, UseIt.com

institute *for* Public Administration

Interactive Tools

- **First, focus on the fundamental tools that enable people to quickly find the info they need.**

- **Implement tools that are likely to serve key audiences and drive repeat visitors. Examples:**
  - **Interactive calendars to find events of interest**
  - **Site search to locate site info by keyword**
  - **Online forms to eliminate need for U.S. Mail**
  - **Surveys to obtain valuable feedback**

- **After doing the above, you may then consider *value-added* e-government tools. But create a solid foundation upon which you can build over time.**

institute *for* Public Administration

5. Make the Design Unique

"Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else."

—Judy Garland

Implement a Unique Design

Graphics, layout, organization, navigation, and functionality are the individual elements of website design. Effectively combining these in a holistic approach that caters to the audiences' needs makes one website memorable, while others are unremarkable.

- Study gov't and non-gov't websites.

- Borrow ideas, but don't simply copy another site.

Greater up-front investment in these principles will result in a more effective website.

But a gov't website shouldn't be "artsy."

institute *for* Public Administration

6. Follow the Web Paradigm

"I don't have time to learn special conventions for your site."

—Anonymous user during usability study

institute *for* Public Administration

The Web Paradigm

Conventions to follow include

- **Using top or left-side navigation (or both).**

- **Placing quick links or search tools at the top of each page.**

- **Making page layouts consistent (i.e., common "look and feel").**

- **Incorporating global navigation elements, such as "breadcrumbs," that allow users to always know their location within any one section of your site.**

institute *for* Public Administration

7. Optimize for Speed

"I feel the need…
the need for speed."

—Maverick and Goose
from the movie *Top Gun*

institute *for* Public Administration

How to Optimize for Speed

"If you [make it fast], they will come."

Making your website fast has less to do with the equipment on which it runs and more to do with the amount of code and graphics a user's browser is asked to process and download. So avoid over-reliance on graphics and animations.

- Reduce unnecessary graphics and animations.

- Optimize all graphics by minimizing file size.

- Build pages with efficient code.

- Design an efficient database.

8. Maximize Accessibility

"All federal employees should understand the requirements of section 508 and how they may apply to their business operations and processes."

—Section508.gov

Accessibility

- **Some have interpreted Section 508 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act to apply to all organizations that receive federal funding of any kind.**

- **Beyond that, many state and local governments are now seeing the wisdom of adopting these standards to better serve their communities, just as placing a placing a wheelchair ramp in at City Hall helps remove a physical barrier.**

- **A properly designed website can offer accessibility without compromising functionality, impact, or your budget.**

institute *for* Public Administration

"A little too late is much too late."

—German Proverb

Timely Information is Essential

- **Providing timely information builds a stronger connection between your municipal government and your community and provides the strongest reason for your audiences to return—frequently.**

- **Consider all the ways to highlight current info.**

  – **The homepage has become the billboard for synopses and links to the latest news, events, and community interests.**

  – **Sending e-mail alerts is also a helpful way to keep your community well informed.**

- **A content-management system (CMS) can help.**

institute *for* Public Administration

10. Provide Accurate Information

"For it is mutual trust, even more than mutual interest, that holds human associations together."

—H. L. Mencken

institute *for* Public Administration

Accurate Information Builds Trust

- **There is no doubt that accurate information is part and parcel of building and maintaining the public trust.**

- **Tips**
  - **Establish a workflow process that can accomplish updates efficiently for each type of content.**
  - **Make sure the process is not complicated or burdensome; don't create a bureaucratic layer that hinders or prevents posting information in a timely way.**
  - **Do a regular review to ensure accuracy and relevancy. Be mindful of life-cycle issues.**

institute *for* Public Administration

A Note About Technology

"Determine that the thing can and shall be done, and then we shall find the way."

—Abraham Lincoln

institute *for* Public Administration

Technology

- **While not unimportant, technology shouldn't drive your project. Rather, your website should be developed out of the municipality's own needs and requirements.**

- **Pick technology that will more likely accomplish your goals. In addition to hardware and software, you may need**

  – **Content-management tools**
  – **Interactive components**
  – **Online applications**

- **Incorporate the suggestions offered in this presentation; the technology will follow.**

institute *for* Public Administration

Credits

This presentation was an adaptation of the book

"Secrets of Successful Websites: How to Create a Government Website That Returns Long-Term Value to Your Organization and The People It Serves"

a publication of Vision Internet *www.visioninternet.com*.

Also see Jakob Nielsen's book, "Designing Web Usability" or see *www.useit.com*.

institute *for* Public Administration